



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

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News Release

VIRGINIA MAN ARRESTED FOR OPERATING ILLEGAL FUNDS TRANSFER FIRM THAT ALLEGEDLY MOVED \$23 MILLION TO SYRIA AND OTHER NATIONS

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Paul J. McNulty, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, Allan J. Doody, Special Agent-in-Charge of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in Washington, D.C., and Leo J. Rossiter, Chief of Police for the Metropolitan Washington Airport Authority (MWAA), announced the arrest yesterday of **Louay Habbal**, age 45, a naturalized United States citizen from Syria, and a resident of Vienna, Virginia, by special agents from ICE and task force officers from the Annandale High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA).

Habbal is charged in an indictment with operating **Mena Exchange**, an unlicensed money transmittal business located at his residence. Late yesterday, ICE agents arrested Habbal upon his arrival at Dulles International Airport on a flight from Damascus, Syria. Today, Habbal made an initial court appearance before U.S. Magistrate Judge Liam O’Grady in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, Virginia. Habbal was released but required to wear an electronic monitoring device.

According to the indictment, Habbal received funds from customers nationwide and deposited these funds in bank accounts in Virginia and elsewhere. After taking a portion of these monies as a fee, Habbal then transferred the remaining funds to other entities for further transfer to individuals overseas that had been designated by his U.S. customers. In total, Habbal transferred or caused to be transferred through Mena Exchange more than \$23 million to Syria and elsewhere around the world from November 2001 to July 2004. ICE agents seized more than \$100,000 from the company’s bank accounts, and other assets.

According to the indictment, Habbal advertised his business through a website called MenaExchange.com. The website describes Mena Exchange as a service provided by Mena First Capital, LLC, which transmits funds between the United States, the Middle East, and North Africa.

“Money is the lifeblood of terrorism and that is why we have made the prosecution of illegal money transmitters a priority of this office. This case does not involve an allegation of terrorism financing, but stopping all improper money transfers may indeed deprive terrorists of financial support,” said U.S. Attorney McNulty.

“This case demonstrates the threat posed by unlicensed money transmittal businesses. Any criminal or terrorist can come to these underground businesses and have their millions wired anywhere in the world in a matter of seconds with no questions asked. ICE’s goal is to identify, disrupt and ultimately dismantle these underground financing and transmittal operations,” said ICE Special Agent-in-Charge Allan Doody.

This case was investigated by the Annandale HIDTA Money Laundering Initiative, an ICE-led group comprised of task force officers from the U.S. Secret Service, Internal Revenue Service, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and detectives from Virginia State Police, Virginia Attorney General’s Office, MPD, Prince William County, Arlington, Alexandria PD and the Metropolitan-Washington Airports Authority.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Steve Mellin and Special Assistant U.S. Attorney Jessica Lombardo are prosecuting the case.

The arrest of Habbal is the latest enforcement action in ICE’s nationwide crackdown on unlicensed money transmittal businesses. The USA Patriot Act, which was signed into law in October 2001, requires money transmittal businesses be licensed by the Federal government and/or applicable state governments. They are also required to file Suspicious Activity Reports. Since that time, thousands of money services businesses nationwide have registered. Nevertheless, many have failed to register and are operating outside the law.

Since the enactment of the USA Patriot Act, ICE has initiated more than 260 investigations into unlicensed money service businesses around the country and executed more than 100 search warrants in connection with these cases. During this time period, ICE investigations into unlicensed money service businesses have resulted in roughly 120 arrests, 130 indictments and the seizure of some \$23 million.

#ICE#

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of five integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.